The rectangular concrete walkway spanning the entrance to the memorial complex with the outside inscription “Behind these gates the earth is moaning” is the main part of the memorial

Author: Avi1111 dr. Avishai Teicher; URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f0/Salaspils_labor_camp_near_Riga.JPG

A Dual Legacy: Reviewing the New Exhibition at the Former Nazi Camp Salaspils

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Cultures of History Forum, published: 31.05.2018

DOI: 10.25626/0084

When in February 2018 a new exhibition opened at the site of the former National Socialist 'Work Education Camp' Salaspils, its reception in the Latvian media was mixed. The history of the camp as well as its Soviet memorialisation are complex and have been frequently contested in Latvian society. The article reviews the new exhibition against this backdrop and asks how the curators present both the history and legacy of the place.

Recommended Citation

Paula Oppermann: A Dual Legacy: Reviewing the New Exhibition at the Former Nazi Camp Salaspils. In: Cultures of History Forum (31.05.2018), DOI: 10.25626/0084

A Dual Legacy: Reviewing the New Exhibition at the Former Nazi Camp Salaspils

In February 2018, a new exhibition opened in Salaspils, 20 km southeast of the Latvian capital Riga. In this town, the Germans had established a Work Education Camp (Arbeitserziehungslager, AEL) during their occupation of Latvia between 1941 to 1944. After the German defeat, the Soviet Union reoccupied Latvia and in 1967 a memorial was opened in Salaspils. It represented Soviet narratives of the Second World War, adulterated the camp's function and concealed the fates and backgrounds of some of its inmates. Ever since Latvia regained independence in 1991, Salaspils' history has been the subject of dispute in Latvian society and academia.

This article reviews the new exhibition within the context of contrasting narratives about Salaspils. The history of the National Socialist AEL as well as that of the Soviet memorial will be described. Based on this, select parts of the new exhibition will be explored to consider how curators have addressed the two dimensions of Salaspils' history and how the exhibition reflects the divided commemoration of the two occupation regimes in today's Latvia.

Work Education Camp Salaspils

When Nazi Germany occupied Latvia in the summer of 1941, the occupiers and their local collaborators immediately commenced the murder of Jewish citizens.[1] Furthermore, (alleged) communists were executed or arrested, and prisons and detainment centres were quickly overcrowded.[2] Partly because of this overcrowding, the leader of the Einsatzgruppe A, Walter Stahlecker, sought permission from the leadership in Berlin to establish a concentration camp at Salaspils.[3] Stahlecker and his subordinate Rudolf Lange planned to transfer political prisoners there in order to exploit their labour, while the Jews of Riga – more than twenty-five thousand people who were incarcerated in a ghetto in October 1941 – were to be forced into Riga's prisons.[4]

Reichs-SS leader and Chief of the German Police Heinrich Himmler rejected demands to establish a concentration camp at Salaspils. An organisational conflict over the camp continued over the course of the war. Himmler did not want German leaders in the occupied territories to erect any "private Concentration Camp".[5] However, he gave permission for an Extended Police Prison and Work Education Camp (Arbeitserziehungslager und erweitertes Polizeigefängnis, AEL) at Salaspils. The AEL were one of many camp types within the National Socialist system, which had a specific function and directive. In the occupied territories, the AEL were under the command of the local Commanding Officers of the Security Police and Security Service, rather than under the directive of the Concentration Camps Inspectorate (Inspektion der Konzentrationslager, IKL). While there was an organisational difference between the camps under the IKL and other camps, it is necessary to emphasise that for prisoners, "labour- and internment-conditions in the AEL were comparable to those in the Concentration Camps".

The construction of Salaspils camp began in late 1941. The Germans quickly replaced Latvian workers with Jews deported to Riga from the German Reich and annexed territories of Austria and Czechoslovakia. They did not even provide them with shelter from the onset of winter.[6] Of the thousand five hundred to two thousand Jewish forced labourers, approximately two third died. Most survivors were sent back to the ghetto when the construction of the camp was completed in the spring of 1942. Only a few Jewish specialised workers were kept behind.[7]

The Germans gradually populated the camp with political prisoners and so-called 'work-avoiders'. Whenever members of the Latvian police battalions were convicted in court, they were also detained there. In the spring and autumn of 1943, more than six thousand women, children and men from eastern Latvia – victims of the "Winterzauber" and "Sommerreise" actions – were interned.[8] As a part of these actions, segments of the Wehrmacht, the SS and SD destroyed villages, murdered civilians and burned houses in eastern Latvia, declaring the region a breeding ground for anti-partisan activities. The SD shot most men on the spot. Wives and children were brought to Salaspils. From there, women were deported to Germany as forced labourers, while their children were forced to remain behind to work with Latvian peasant families. Shortly afterwards, Salaspils served as a camp for refugees who had attempted escape from the frontlines.[9] Next to the camp for civilians, there was also a camp for prisoners of war (POWs) which was part of Stalag 350 (Stammlager). The Soviet POWs interned at Salaspils died in huge numbers due to poor living conditions, violence and executions.[10] In September of 1944, in the course of the approach of the Red Army, the Germans deported the remaining prisoners to Stutthof Concentration Camp, burned the camp at Salaspils, and destroyed most of the evidence.

Soviet Commemoration

Immediately after the Red Army re-captured the territory in 1944, members of the Soviet Extraordinary Commission for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes opened an investigation into Salaspils. Reports resulting from the investigation were published in the newspapers.[11] From late 1948 onwards, however, (commemoration) politics was re-oriented towards the cult of Stalin and his victories: places of former camps were reminders of defeat, and therefore memorials there were not desired. Only in the period of de-Stalinisation under Nikita Khrushchev, did terror and repression decline. Now, the regime depended on public support based on consent. This was reflected in commemoration politics: national Soviet governments created memorials of the war as "symbols of Soviet unity."[12]

Within the context of these developments, planning for a memorial at Salaspils began in the late 1950s. The memorial was opened in 1967 and became one of the most frequently visited sites in Latvia.[13] The huge memorial consists of a 110-meter-long rectangular enclosed corridor or walkway, made of concrete, that spans the entrance to the camp grounds and bears the inscription "Aiz šiem vārtien vaid zeme" ("behind these gates moans the earth"). Behind this concrete corridor, a large square serves for commemorative ceremonies. In the far back of the former cam territory there are seven sculptures of men, women and children, up to 16 meters high, also made of concrete. Each bears a symbolic name, such as "the humiliated", "the invincible", "the mother", and the troika of "solidarity", the "oath", and "Red Front".[14] Across the memorial complex, loudspeakers transmitted the sound of a metronome, symbolising a heartbeat.

The memorial's popularity was fostered by the government, which presented Salaspils as the site of "the biggest of 23 mass-destruction-camps which were erected by the German fascists on the territory of the occupied Latvia".[15] Newspaper articles and books estimated that about one hundred thousand victims were interned at Salaspils. They focused on the fate of child-inmates, reporting that the Germans had exploited them for blood transfers for their military and other lethal activities.[16] Other victims of the camp were given no space in the commemoration: members of the national resistance, who had been incarcerated for fighting against the Germans and for Latvian independence, were not mentioned. This was also the case for Jewish inmates, whose fate was concealed. Similarly, sites of National Socialist crimes directed specifically against Jews, such as Rumbula, received little attention.[17]

Salaspils after 1991

Since Latvia regained its full independence, the Soviet presentation of Salaspils' function and the living conditions in which inmates were kept have been the subject of discussion. The memorial remained an important place of commemoration, but events were and are organised and attended by various groups, often divided along ethnic lines. Some are held by members of the Russian speaking minority and sometimes visited by diplomats from Russia and former inmates of Salaspils.[18] These groups do not usually attend the official Latvian commemoration ceremonies held annually on 8th of May. Similarly, Jewish commemoration at Salaspils seems individualised. In 2004, a memorial for murdered Jews was made possible through a private donation from a survivor. It is dedicated to the Jews of Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. The stone tribute is slightly removed from the main memorial complex; most visitors today are not likely to come across it.

The different groups have different – sometimes conflicting – perceptions of the camp's history and its Soviet commemoration which have been a point of contention for nearly 30 years now. While Latvian researchers and media emphasise that much of the information that circulated prior to 1991 consisted of myths,[19] Russian media and academics disagree. The most prevalent example is the discussion around the fate of children interned at Salaspils. Because of the poor living conditions, many children became extremely weak. The mortality rate among them was particularly high.[20] According to new research, however, there is no evidence to suggest that they were exploited as blood-carriers for Wehrmacht soldiers or were victims of medical experiments.[21] Nevertheless, the dominance of the Soviet myth is astonishing. At a scientific conference in Salaspils in 2015, which the author of this article attended, a historian presenting documents dismantling the myth about the medical experiments was verbally attacked by furious survivors in the audience. When the new exhibition was opened in February 2018, the Latvian media praised it as "finally showing the truth", while the Russian media accused curators of belittling the suffering of inmates, making "a health resort out of Salaspils", and concealing the stories of child prisoners.

Ever since Latvia's independence, the physical state of the memorial has also been an issue. The media has repeatedly reported that the Salaspils municipality has struggled to find the financial resources necessary to maintain the complex.[22] For decades, the memorial was not renovated. A small exhibition showcased images drawn by former inmates, a map of the memorial, and photos of the destroyed camp, probably taken by the Extraordinary Commission in 1944.[23] There was, however, almost no factual information about the camp, and to some visitors it seemed as if it had been forgotten and neglected.[24] The fact that the memorial became a part of the canon of cultural assets and listed as a site of cultural heritage did not change this.

The financial shortages seem to have been one reason why it took so many years for a new exhibition to open. Furthermore, the history of Salaspils, and particularly the memorial, has become the subject of comprehensive research only recently.[25] The first monograph about the National Socialist camp Salaspils, Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme, was published in 2016. One of the authors is historian Uldis Neiburgs, who is also a curator of the new exhibition.

The New Exhibition

In 2017, construction works began on the new exhibition in Salaspils, based on the plans of a team of curators made up of Uldis Neiburgs, architect Līga Gaile and artist Ģirts Boronovskis. They emphasised that they wanted to incorporate the new exhibition into the existing memorial rather than altering the shape of the 1960s complex. They utilised existing rooms inside the concrete walkway and added new information plaques. Two rooms, one at the front and one at the back of the rectangular walkway, are dedicated to the history of the Nazi camp. The space connecting them is used to tell the history of the Soviet memorial. The walkway has a second floor from which the visitor can view the outside scenery and the sculptures. In the staircases leading to this level, individual stories of former inmates are presented. All texts are provided in Latvian, English and Russian.

Exhibition I: The History of the Camp

The first room contains an overview text about the camp, as well as illuminated displays containing short texts and images that describe the background and fate of each prisoner group. Differentiating between these groups represents a contrast to the Soviet tendency to equalise all prisoners under the term, “Soviet citizens”. Due to the extreme brevity of the texts, however, the reasons for their internment and different treatment often remain unclear. Furthermore, the introductory text emphasises that Salaspils was an AEL and not a ‘concentration camp,’ but it does not explain why this difference is important, or what the terminology reveals about general conflicts of hierarchy within the Nazi state. Moreover, it does not make clear that the category of the camp did not alleviate conditions for prisoners in any way. This has led to misinterpretations. The Latvian press has argued, for instance, that the exhibition demonstrates that the AEL was not as terrible as a concentration camp, a view that neglects the experience of thousands of Jewish forced labourers, children and Soviet POWs who were shot or died because of the harsh camp conditions.

Such conclusions might evolve from the exhibition’s lack of contextualisation of Salaspils within the general Nazi occupation structure of Latvia and particularly, the Holocaust. In one of the displays, the visitor reads that Jews deported from Germany and other occupied countries were forced to construct the camp, and that many died because of cold, torture and disease. There is no mention, however, of the fact that the National Socialists forced German Jews to build the camp after the Latvian Jewish community had already been murdered. Lange lobbied for a concentration camp in October of 1941 likely because of the need for more space for the Latvian Jews in the Riga ghetto. A month later, however, this was no longer a topic, as nearly all ghetto inmates had been murdered at Rumbula. While Neiburgs and his colleagues examine this carefully in their monograph,[26] the exhibition makes no mention of this largest mass killing of Jews in Latvia.

One display is dedicated to the victims of the earlier mentioned “Sommerreise” and “Winterzauber” actions, many of whom were deported to Germany as forced labourers. This chapter in the history of the occupation was not discussed during the Soviet period. In fact, even in (Western) Europe, the issue of forced labourers – particularly those from countries of the former USSR – has been neglected until recently.[27] The exhibition highlights their plight, as well as that of Latvian and Polish national resistance fighters who were incarcerated in Salaspils for undermining German rule and attempting to regain Latvian independence.

In the display about the liquidation and immediate aftermath of the camp, the curators criticise the 1944 investigation of the Soviet Extraordinary Commission: “its conclusions were imprecise: They were compiled in great haste and according to the ideology of the Soviet occupation regime”. Unfortunately, the text does not explain what the Extraordinary Commission was, even though visitors from Western

countries in particular are not likely to be familiar with it. In fact, the Soviet leadership established the Commission to produce propaganda material. Recently, however, researchers have emphasised that the local investigators at the sites of Nazi crimes collected their material relatively independently when questioning witnesses, exhuming mass graves, taking photographs and drawing maps of killing sites.[28] While their findings were sometimes falsified in official reports and in the media, the evidence collected by the local investigators is of immense value for research about the Holocaust in the occupied countries.

From the first room, stairs lead to the second level of the concrete building. In the staircase, individual stories of former inmates are presented. Showcases contain letters and memoirs with photographs and personal items, poems written by inmates, and quotations, for example about the hunger among children.

In the room at the back of the building, videos of interviews with former inmates and witnesses are displayed. They are currently only available in Latvian and Russian, but there are plans for their translation into English. This room contains an imitation of a barrack bunk bed, and a miniature replica of the camp, and is kept nearly in darkness. Information boards here describe everyday life, working conditions and food rations, and display images drawn by survivors. This collection is a valuable supplement to the introductory texts in the first room.

Outside the main building of the memorial, additional plaques provide another overview of the different phases of the camp and inmates interned there. Two plaques summarize overall numbers of victims of the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Latvia, but without contextualizing them. This bears the risk of equalising Nazi and Soviet occupations of the country, which is also evident in the presentation of the memorial's history.[29]

Exhibition II: The History of the Memorial

The history of the Soviet memorial presented in the inner part of the concrete walkway occupies the largest space of the exhibition. Visitors learn about the planning, construction and presentation of Salaspils during the Soviet era. Texts in this section are longer than in the historical section; the biographies of the architects, for instance, are particularly extended. It is understandable that the curators wanted to honour the artists, but information about their PhD theses or when they gained appointments as professors risks overwhelming the visitor with facts unrelated to the camp or the memorial. Foreigners unfamiliar with buildings in Latvia designed by the architects may find this part more confusing than enlightening.

Various texts describe the process of designing the memorial, the cooperation between the architects, and what the newspapers wrote about the powerful images produced there to commemorate the struggle of the Soviet people. The curators provide quotations from artists involved in the building process. Some emphasise the successful cooperation of the collective, others suggest that individual ideas were undermined and that it was sometimes difficult to work against prevalent Soviet views of art. Visitors learn how the architects experienced working on the memorial and within the Soviet system. Unfortunately, no dates are given for quotations, some of which seem to have been articulated during, and some after, the Soviet period. There is also no discussion of the fact that the Soviet media may not have reflected the actual views of the artists.

The exhibition emphasises that the original memorial was designed according to Soviet ideology. It does

not explain, however, that this ideology developed over time, giving instead an impression of the Soviet regime as a monolithic entity. Salaspils, however, is an example of change in Soviet (commemoration) politics, and such background knowledge is pivotal for understanding why the Latvian Soviet government built the memorial at all, and why at that particular time. Also, it does not reveal why so much attention has been devoted to Salaspils, and not to other places of Nazi crimes such as Rumbula or Mežaparks.[30]

The upper level of the concrete walkway overlooks the landscape and sculptures. A display containing a map shows the former location of the barracks. Short and comprehensible texts explain the meaning of the sculptures which commemorate only the fate of communists and children interned at Salaspils, and not Jewish prisoners or members of the national resistance movements.

Conclusion

The curators of the new exhibition were confronted with two dimensions of Salaspils' history: its role as a National Socialist camp and as a main site of commemoration policy in Soviet Latvia from the 1960s to 1991. They aimed to present the form and function of the AEL Salaspils, to tell the history of all prisoners, and to dismantle prominent myths about the camp which were established during the Soviet period.

The result is a rather unequal presentation of the two dimensions: there is a remarkable contrast between the density of facts about the memorial's designers in the second section of the exhibition and the short and generalising texts in the section that describes the camp's history. The curators do not depict Salaspils as a "health resort", as some critics have argued. Nonetheless, its function within the Nazi camp system is not sufficiently contextualised, and neither is its role in the Holocaust in Latvia: the exploitation of Jewish forced labourers in the construction of Salaspils was an aspect of genocide. The fact that life in the camp was later bearable for some inmates, or that conditions in other National Socialist camps were worse, does not change this.

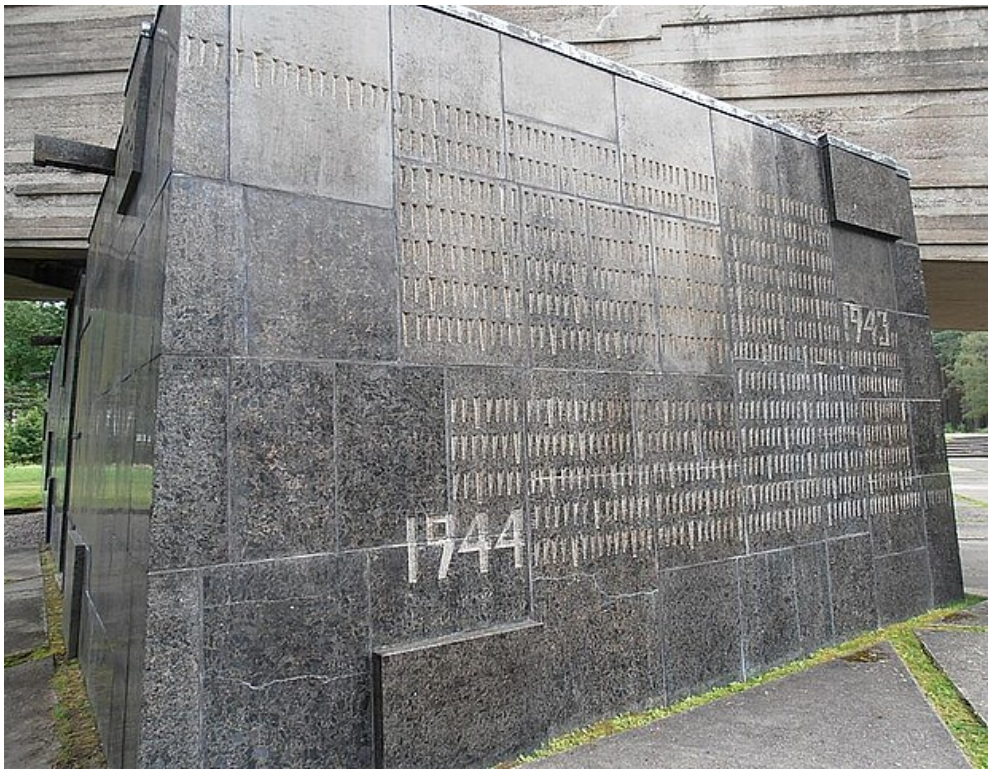
While Salaspils' role within the Nazi occupation and annihilation policy is relegated to the background, Soviet commemoration policy is not described in a very nuanced way, but rather presented as part of a monolithic system. The presentation suggests that the Soviet disinformation and propaganda about Salaspils is being put on the same level as the very crimes committed in Salaspils by the Nazi regime. This plays into the hands of those who equalise the Nazi and Soviet regimes, and thereby downplays National Socialist genocidal aspirations in Europe.

Footnotes

1. The question of the collaboration of parts of Latvian society in the murder of Jews and other civilians cannot be adequately addressed in this article, and remains a focus of research; for example: Margers Vestermanis, Die nationalsozialistischen Haftstätten und Todeslager im okkupierten Lettland 1941–1945, in Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Entwicklung und Struktur, vol. 1 (Die Zeit des Nationalsozialismus), edited by Christoph Dieckmann, Ulrich Herbert, and Karin Orth, Frankfurt a.M.: Wallstein Verlag, 2002, pp. 472–492; Katrin Reichelt, Lettland unter deutscher Besatzung 1941–1944. Der lettische Anteil am Holocaust, Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011.
2. Andrej Angrik and Peter Klein, The "Final Solution" in Riga. Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944, New York, Oxford: Berghan Books, 2009, p. 198.
3. The Einsatzgruppen were the main forces deployed for the mass killing of Jews in the occupied territories. When the units were transformed into stationary police departments, Stahlecker became Commander of the Security Police and Security Service of the Ostland.
4. Kārlis Kangeris, Uldis Neiburgs and Rudīte Vīksne, Aiz šiem vārtiem vaid zeme. Salaspils nometne 1941-1944, Rīga: Latvijas Mediji, 2016, pp. 80–81, and p. 94.
5. Quoted in Ibid., p. 85.
6. Franziska Jahn, Salaspils, in Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, vol. 9, edited by Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009, p. 549.
7. Kangeris, Neiburgs and Vīksne 2016, p. 101–102.
8. Ibid., p. 208 f.
9. Jahn 2009, p. 553.
10. Vestermanis 2002, p. 479.
11. The Extraordinary Commission was established to disclose National Socialist crimes in the USSR and to produce material to be published in the media; Andrej Umansky, Geschichtsschreiber wider Willen? Einblick in die Quellen der „Außerordentlichen Staatlichen Kommission" und der „Zentralen Stelle", in Bewusstes Erinnern und bewusstes Vergessen, edited by Angelika Nußberger and Caroline Gall, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011, pp. 347–374.
12. Imke Hansen, Sowjetische und postsowjetische Repräsentationen des Zweiten Weltkriegs, in Deutsche Besatzung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944. Vernichtungskrieg, Reaktionen, Erinnerung, edited by Jörg Morré and Babette Quinkert, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014, p. 302.
13. Valsts kultu□ras pieminekl□u aizsardzi□bas inspekcija [State Inspection for Heritage Protection of the Republic of Latvia, VKPAI], Inv. nr.: 28183-3.
14. Ibid.
15. Ka□rlis Sausni□tis, Todeslager Salaspils, Riga: Liesma 1969, p. 2.
16. For example: Miervaldis Birze, Salaspils, Riga: Avots, 1985.
17. The Germans and local collaborators murdered 25 000 to 27 000 Jews over two days in the Rumbula forest in the outskirts of Riga on 30 November and 8 December 1941.
18. See Viesturs Sprūde, Salaspils memoriālam būtu vajadzīga vēsturiski patiesa ekspozīcijam, Latvijas Avīze (3 October 2014), retrieved 28 May 2018.
19. Newspapers in Latvia and abroad regularly condemned the Soviet commemoration throughout the 1990s and 2000s. See for example: Salaspils memoriāls kļūst par totalitāro režīmu upuru piemiņas vietu, Diena (12 July 1994), or Franks Gordons, 'Cinisma kalngals', Latvija Amerikā, no. 1 (01 January 2005).
20. Jahn 2009, p. 554.
21. Kangeris, Neiburgs and Vīksne 2016, p. 202–205.
22. See for example: Piešķir naudu Salaspils memoriālam, Laiks, No. 37 (12 September 1998).
23. The website dark-tourism provides some images of the old exhibition, retrieved 18 May 2018.
24. Jahn 2009, p. 555.
25. When, in 2014, the author of this article researched the Salaspils memorial to compare its history to Jewish sites of commemoration, no scientific literature about it existed; Paula Oppermann, Early commemoration of the Holocaust. On the Creation of the Rumbula Memorial in Soviet Latvia, in Occupation – Annihilation – Forced Labour. Papers from the 20th Workshop on the History and Memory of National Socialist Concentration Camps, edited by Frédéric Bonnesoeur et al., Berlin: Monopol Verlag, 2017.
26. Kangeris, Neiburgs and Vīksne 2016, p. 79.
27. One of the few academic works about Latvian forced labourers is Tilmann Plath, Zwischen Schonung und Menschenjagden: die Arbeitseinsatzpolitik in den baltischen Generalbezirken des Reichskommissariats Ostland 1941–1944, Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2012.
28. See: Umansky 2011.
29. Dan Stone describes this as the "rhetoric of the 'double genocide'" which is prevalent in various East European countries; Dan Stone, Goodbye to All That? The Story of Europe Since 1945, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 277.

30. Mežaparks (Kaiserwald) was the only concentration camp on Latvian soil. It was erected in 1943 to incarcerate mainly Jewish prisoners; Franziska Jahn, Riga-Kaiserwald, in Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, vol. 8, edited by Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, Munich: C.H. Beck, 2008, pp. 17–67.

View through the memorial gate on to the former camp area; in the background are the sculptures erected in 1967
Author: Agnete; URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/Memorial_Salaspils_1.jpg



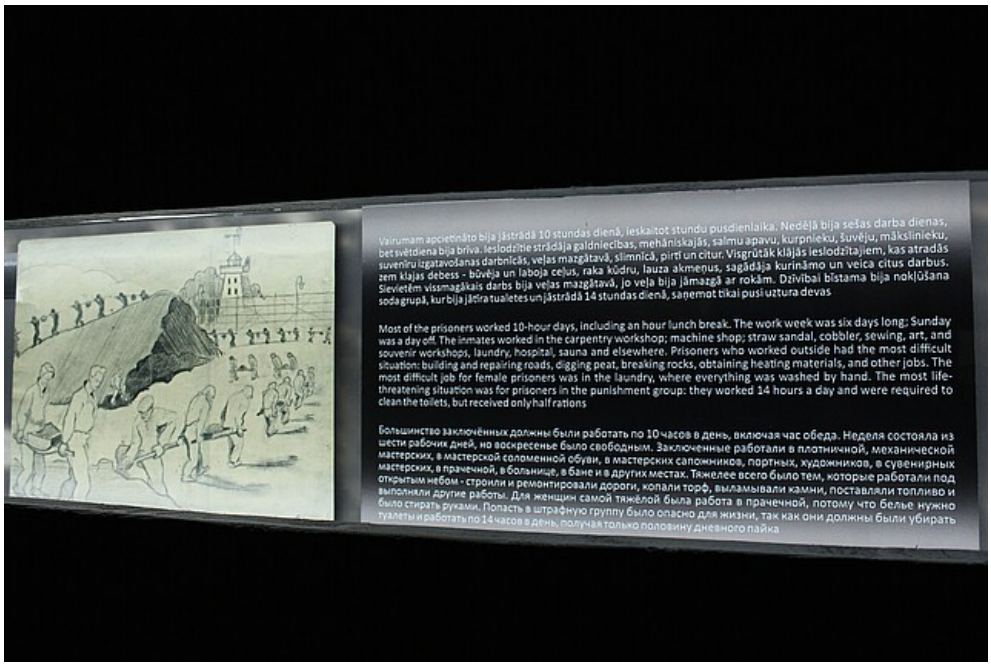
Outside wall depicting engraved lines for each day that the camp existed
Author: Derbrauni; URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/70/Salaspils_Entrance.jpg

Each box in the first room is dedicated to one group of prisoners
Author: Paula Oppermann

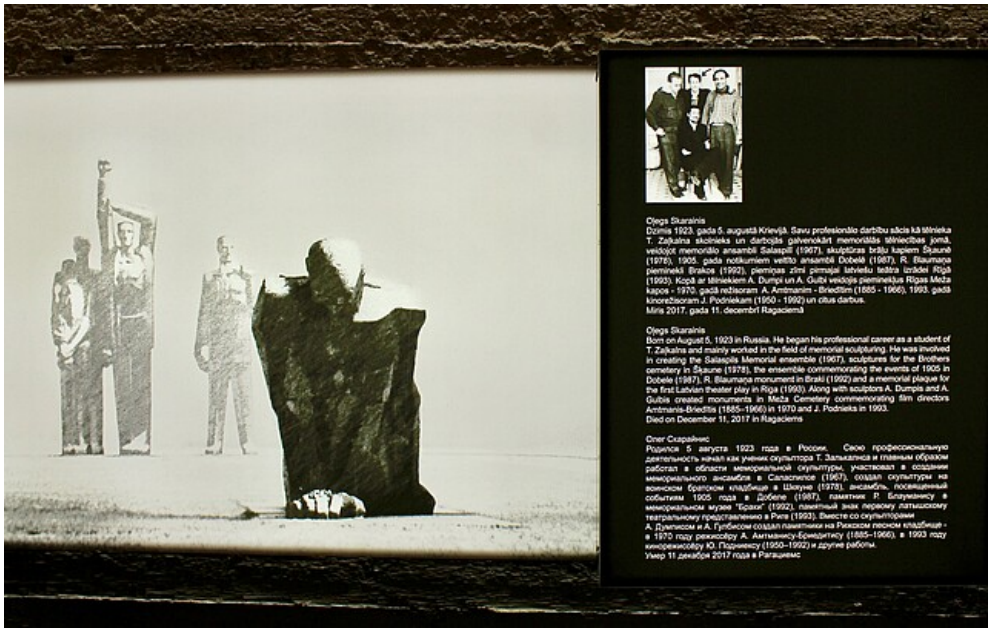
Information panel about Jews from Germany and other countries, who were deported to Latvia and forced to build the camp in Salaspils without any mentioning of the fate of Latvian Jews

Paula Oppermann

The history of the memorial, presented inside the concrete walkway
Paula Oppermann



The last room informs about the everyday life in the camp. It displays images drawn by former inmates, personal items and interviews
Paula Oppermann



Graphic of one of the memorial sculptures, "the humiliated", with detailed information about the artist Olegs Skarainis in three languages
Author: Paula Oppermann